"WE DO NOT NEED OUTSIDERS TO STUDY US". REFLECTIONS ON ACTIVISM AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT: In this article I analyze the tensions and difficulties that activist-scholars face in developing collaborative and critical social movement research. Through a series of reflections on my own trajectory into the academy and seventeen months of field research with the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement, I cautiously offer some ways forward for social movement researchers. Contextualizing these reflections in the rich literature on the ethics of social movement research, I argue that activist-scholars should attempt to design research questions that generate movement-relevant theory, leverage our (limited) influence to study powerful actors, move beyond dichotomous understandings of the "researcher" and the "research subject," and be continually self-reflective about the unresolvable contradictions that come with being an activist-scholar. I end the article by suggesting that no matter how movement-relevant or collaborative our scholarship, this does not replace the "action" part of the action-theory praxis.

Introduction: Becoming an Activist-Scholar

I did not come to graduate school to be an academic. I came to graduate school to work with the Brazilian Landless Workers Movement (*Movimento Sem Terra*, or MST). As an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, I was involved in local struggles to promote workers' rights and anti-sweat shop organizing. I majored in Latin American Studies because I was moved by the continent's

history of resistance to U.S imperialism. I decided to study abroad in Brazil to learn more about these struggles, and the many social movements that were joining together to insist that "another world is possible" (Mertes, 2004).

In Brazil, I worked with a women's organization—Group Wonder Woman[1]—whose "method" of social change was popular education—a type of informal education for poor communities that draws on the ideas of Paulo Freire and his famous book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2002). These experiences with popular education in Brazil defined the next decade of my life. I decided that I wanted to be a grassroots educator, in order to develop similar educational programs with social movements in the United States. I dedicated myself to reading the works of Paulo Freire, Myles Horton, and other popular educators (Freire, 2002; Gadotti, 1994; hooks, 1994; Horton & Freire, 1990). After graduating from college, I spent a year engaging with grassroots educational initiatives in Bolivia. Then, I briefly worked as an adult educator for an immigrant workers center near Washington D.C. Eventually, I decided to return to graduate school, to learn more about one of the most famous social movements currently incorporating popular education into its movement: the MST.

My dissertation explores the educational initiatives of the MST and the political and economic contexts that allow MST activists to implement their educational practices into the public school system. This research is situated within a larger theoretical debate about the nature of state-society relations.

[1] This organization is located on the periphery of the city of Recife, in the state of Pernambuco. See the organization's blog at, http://gmulhermaravilha.blogspot.com.

Thus, my dissertation not only describes the history and current implementation of the MST's educational ideas, but also disputes a long-standing position in the social movement literature that claims disruptive protest is the only effective strategy for achieving social movement goals (Foweraker, 2001; Michels, 1915; Piven & Cloward, 1997). Instead, I argue that marginalized populations have significant power to participate in and transform state institutions, and I suggest the limitations of concepts such as "cooptation" in analyzing contemporary state-society relations.

Gillian and Pickerill (2012) argue that it is a growing trend for academics to openly take on an activist-scholar identity (p. 135). Over the past seven years a graduate student at UC Berkeley I have maintained many of my activist commitments, and in doing so, I have experienced the real tensions that come with being an activist-scholar. These tensions have been explored by other eminent scholars such as Bevington & Dixon (2005), F. F. Piven (2010), and most recently in a Special Issue of the *Journal of Social Movements Studies* edited by Gillan and Pickerill (2012). A major issue is that, on the one hand, academia is dismissive of activist research pursuits, and on the other hand, activist-researches are often critiqued by social movements as being irrelevant to their struggles (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012). This begs the question: Is it possible to overcome the contradictions inherent in activist-scholarship and social movement research?

Initially, I might have answered this question by arguing that activist-scholars play an important role by producing knowledge about social movements that can be disseminated to a larger international

audience. However, as Choudry (2013) and Chesters (2012) convincingly argue, this discounts—or at the very least overshadows—the knowledge production that occurs within the social movements themselves. This tension is even more acute for a large national social movement such as the MST, whose activists have proven to be more than capable of producing knowledge about their own struggle (see the "Introduction to the MST" and Moraes and Witcel for more information on this issue).

The MST's "organic intellectuals"—as Gramsci would call them—are not difficult to find, and "as organizer[s] of masses of men" they offer the movement a "homogeneity and an awareness of its own function" (Gramsci, 1971, p. 5), which unites activists across the country. If I were really concerned about disseminating knowledge about the MST, why not focus on translating these Portuguese texts into English? Or, if I actually valued activism, why not leave academia and join the MST or a similar U.S. movement, as an organic member of the struggle? Over and over again in Brazil these MST leaders told me: "We do not need outsiders to study us." So what was I doing there?

This article is a series of reflections about doing shared, collaborative, and critical research on and with the MST, as an activist-scholar. I discuss several of the lessons I learned while doing research with the MST, including the importance of embracing the contradictions that are produced by being an activist-scholar; moving beyond a dichotomous understanding of "subject" and "researcher"; understanding collaboration as international solidarity; and, reflecting on how power dynamics influence, inform, and potentially

strengthen social movement research. I argue that there are several roles that outside researches can play when studying social movements. However, these research roles do not replace the "activist" aspect of the activist-scholar identity, which is often sidelined in discussions on research ethics. I end the article with some (in) conclusions[2] about ways forward for activist-scholars.

Lessons I learned with and from the MST

The MST's status as one of the largest social movements in Latin America, and its initiatives in diverse areas such as agroecology, cooperative agricultural production, and education, have drawn an interdisciplinary group of international scholars to its door steps. Given the challenges the MST faces across the country, movement activists are understandably skeptical of outside scholarship on the movement. There have been dozens of people who have researched the MST and either left without offering anything in return (not even their publications), or worse, have only emphasized negative aspects of the movement and provided fodder for conservative critics. Furthermore, hosting researchers takes time, energy, and financial resources away from the MST's other tasks.

In contrast to smaller movements, the MST's national scale and resource base has allowed it to develop a formal process for dealing with researchers. The MST has an International Relations Sector (*Setor de Relações Internacionais*, or SRI), which primarily focuses on maintaining

[2] I want to thank Cecelia Lucas for introducing me to the concept of "(in) conclusions" (see her dissertation: Lucas, 2013).

relationships with international organizations financially supporting the movement, but is also charged with vetting all research requests. This organizational structure makes the activist-researcher relationship different from other movements. If researchers are able to make direct contact with the SRI—usually through previous connections—they are asked to write a justification of their research project and the ways in which it will contribute to the movement. Committees of "Friends of the MST" throughout Europe and North America facilitate this process of vetting. For example, if there is a U.S. citizen who requests to do research with the MST, the Friends of the MST-U.S. has a lengthy survey that they ask researchers to fill out, even before considering their request.[3] This process requires scholars to clarify their contribution to the movement from the very beginning of the research process.

The Question of "Collaboration" and Getting Access

Through my initial contact with the MST, I quickly learned that the movement's conception of collaboration did not simply mean being in dialogue with activists and developing movement-relevant research questions. The MST leadership also believes that the physical presence of international activists within MST communities is an important form of collaboration as it expresses international solidarity. This is the reason why the movement sends brigades of MST activists to countries around the world, from Haiti, to Palestine, to Vietnam, so

[3] I am currently part of the Friends of the MST national coordinating committee in the United States, and I participate in this vetting process.

activists can share their stories of struggle and learn from each other. Thus, the presence of international activists (more so than "researchers") in the movement is perceived as a positive development. However, activist-scholars are asked to articulate how they will engage in this type of international solidarity while working with the movement, and how they plan to share their experiences with the "grassroots/rank and file" in their organizations upon returning home. Thus, activist-scholarship is linked to social transformation in one's domestic context.

In my first contact with the International Relations Sector (SRI), I emphasized my background as a political activist in United States and the lessons that the MST could teach U.S. social movements about popular education. I also suggested the possibility of sharing my experiences as an activist in the U.S. context with the MST, in order to promote more international dialogue. At no moment did I make a claim about how my research findings would contribute to the movement's struggle. At this stage I did not think that promoting the data I would gather as inherently valuable would align with the MST's vision of collaboration.

The SRI eventually granted me permission to study the MST, and I am sure that this was a result of my political commitments in the United States and not my status as a UC Berkeley graduate student researcher. I consciously downplayed my position as a doctoral student throughout my fieldwork, and instead, I emphasized my identity as a political activist. This choice of self-presentation articulated me as "another activist in solidarity" with the movement, as opposed to solely a researcher. At

first, this use of my previous activism to make contact with the movement seemed potentially unethical. However, if international solidarity truly aligns with one's larger research intentions—as it does mine—then this emphasis is simply part of acknowledging the importance of activism relative to research. In the end, I have found that the MST activists themselves know how to determine your level of political commitment. The key point here is that collaboration is not only about the relevance of your research findings; it is also about being part of similar political struggles across national borders.

The Question of "Critique" and Framing my Research

My first two months researching the MST were in June and July of 2009, during a period of "pre-dissertation" research that was funded through the Social Science Research Council. Once I had the official "okay" from the International Relations Sector (SRI), opportunities opened up in MST communities across the country. In only two months I went to six different Brazilian states, dozens of MST settlements and camps, and over forty schools.

When I arrived in Brazil, my intention was to study the types of educational pedagogies that MST activists have developed, and the effects that these educational initiatives have on movement youth. However, as I travelled around I was confronted with the fact that youth in every school and community I visited were already doing this research. As MST activists Zimmerman and Witcel emphasize in their article in this special issue, research is a central political philosophy of the movement. It is a process through which people discover the nature of their

reality, in order to intervene. Young MST activists are continually taught the importance of conducting research, "systemizing" this research, and "socializing" it with their communities. The fact that MST activists are continually researching their own movement challenges the traditional dichotomy that scholars construct between "researchers" and "research subjects."

I concur with Gillan & Pickerill (2012) that, "if social movement research projects rely mostly on listening to activists' analyses and then simply parroting these lessons to an academic community, then it would be difficult to see it as having any benefits to the social movements themselves beyond, perhaps, amplifying the voices of activists" (p. 138). The MST, as a large national social movement and member of an international network of peasant movements, *La Via Campesina* (Desmarais, 2007), did not need me to amplify its voice. Simply "parroting" the research that dozens of activists were already conducting on the nature of the MST's educational initiatives did not feel like a contribution or a real form of collaboration.

In addition, I was confronted with the question of what "critical" research on a social movement actually meant. I knew that my research was unlikely to produce any conclusive evidence about the effects of the MST's educational initiatives on the overall trend of rural to urban youth migration. Given the dominance of industrialization, urbanization, and agribusiness in Brazil, the MST's success stories are similar to salmon swimming up a strong river. As a sympathetic researcher, I was inclined to emphasize the fish who managed to swim against this current. However, if I emphasized the

fish, how would I make this research critical and not simply "cheer-leading" for the movement? On the other hand, I did not want to be responsible for a study that the MST's educational initiatives were irrelevant to youth migration. This latter argument seemed like a critique, but not the type of constructive critique that I wanted to make.

As the social movement scholars I have previously cited argue, the types of questions we ask as activist-scholars should always be relevant to the social movements we are studying. Bevington and Dixon (2005) define movement-relevant theory as scholarship that "seeks to draw out useful information from a variety of contexts and translate it into a form that is more readily applicable by movements to new situations – i.e. theory" (p. 189). Similarly, I wanted to collect data that was not already being collected by movement activists, and that did not simply describe the MST's initiatives as "effective," "somewhat effective," or not at all "effective," by some arbitrary criteria.

What forms of knowledge production would be helpful to the MST? I decided to move away from framing my research as a study of the *effects* of the MST's educational initiatives, and instead, focus on *why* the MST is able to transform public schools in some locations and not others. Bevington & Dixon (2005) argue that, "movement-relevant scholarship should not, and indeed cannot, be uncritical adulation of a favored movement" (p. 191). By analyzing the process of implementing alternative pedagogies in public schools in locations where MST activists are both successful and unsuccessful, I hoped my research could move from "uncritical

adulation" to an analysis of the barriers and catalysts of institutional transformation.

The Question of "Power" and Studying the State

Thus, taking my cue from the MST activists who told me that, "We do not need outsiders to study us," I decided to shift my dissertation to focus on the state-society relations developing between MST activists and government officials across the country. I believe that scholars in academia are uniquely positioned to research politicians, government officials, local elites, and other actors who hold power over social movements.

Although public schools are commonly understood as an ideological state apparatus and institutions of social reproduction (Althusser, 1984; Bowles & Gintis, 1976), my theoretical framework follows a Gramscian understanding of state institutions as terrains of contestation. My primary research question transformed into the following: what are the political, economic, and social conditions that allow for the implementation of the MST's alternative educational pedagogies into public schools? Given the MST's high level of success transforming public schools in some regions, and their complete failure in other contexts, I could analyze both the structural and historically contingent factors that produced these different outcomes. Many MST activist-students approach their research from a similar theoretical framework. However, most of these activists do not have access to the same state actors that I did as a white woman from the United States, affiliated with the University of California, Berkeley.

I quickly learned that I could leverage the perception of the United States as a global conservative force in order to get access to politicians from all ideological leanings. Without asking about my personal political stance, state officials expressed to me their honest opinion of the MST and agrarian reform. In addition to my race and nationality, my gender and my youth also facilitated my ability to engage representatives of the state, as I was perceived to be "unthreatening." Political officials—most of who were men—were open to talking to me and seemed unconcerned about my probing questions. In fact, both politicians and MST activists perceived me as someone who needed advice, protection, and guidance. Thus, my positionality as young, white woman in Brazil facilitated my research access in particular ways.

I did half of my research over seventeen months of fieldwork with representatives of the Brazilian government, and the other half of my research with the MST. I designed my study to examine five different Brazilian states and municipalities, and in each location I interviewed local mayors, municipal and state secretaries of education, educational bureaucrats, and school principals. In addition, I spent a significant time participating in spaces where state-society dynamics were playing out: state advisory boards that included MST activists, meetings between MST education collectives and local mayors, and parent-teacher meetings with both politicians and MST activists present. This research methodology allowed me to collect sensitive data on the nature of state-society relations across Brazil, and how the MST

leveraged control over public schools in diverse political contexts.

The Question of "Sharing" and "Giving-Back" to the MST

In his description of knowledge production within grassroots community organizations, Choudry (2013) notes the priority activists put on collaboration, sharing, and feedback. One person he interviews describes this collaboration as a type of "peer-review" process, which allows activists to be challenged and receive serious feedback from their peers (p. 141). This concept of collaboration and sharing goes beyond the idea of "member checking" commonly found in textbooks on qualitative research methods. Member checking involves the process of "testing" a researcher's data, analytical categories, and interpretations by "checking" its validity with informants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In contrast, the process of sharing that Choudry describes is not only about assessing the validity of one's findings but also allowing activists' conclusions about the data to inform every stage of the analysis. Dedication to an open dialogue with social movements is critical—before, during, and after the research and writing process.

Throughout my seventeen months in Brazil, I was constantly engaging in conversations with activists about my research findings. The questions I asked during interviews transformed throughout this period, as I would include information from previous interviews into my subsequent data collection. This was a form of triangulation (Mathison, 1988), as I asked interviewees to reflect

on the experiences of other activists and state actors across the country, and assess their local relevance. Sometimes I would even share anonymous excerpts from my previous interviews, so activists could directly analyze the statements that were being made.

In addition to this constant process of dialogue and reflection, I asked the MST national leadership if I could present—or what they refer to as "socialize"—my research findings before leaving Brazil. My goal was two-fold: First, I wanted to "give back" to the movement in some way before returning home, especially given how long it would take to write-up my research findings and translate these findings into Portuguese. Second, I wanted to hear activists' reflections on my initial research findings and see if there were any major critiques about how I was analyzing my data.

It is a testament to the importance that the MST places on research, collaboration, and sharing, that in response to my request to present my research the MST leadership insisted that I do so in five different locations across the country. Consequently, I presented my research to a course that MST activists were taking on adult education in the state of Ceará, to the MST education sector in Rio Grande do Sul, to a national course on the Pedagogy of the MST taking place in the MST's first national "movement school" in Veranópolis, to a university-level pedagogy course of MST activists in São Paulo, and to a post-graduate program on "Marxism and Education" at the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. This latter presentation was by far the most intimidating, as dozens of MST educational leaders were enrolled in this program. I literally found

myself presenting to the founders of the MST education sector! What could I possibly say to this group?

Luckily, because I had done half of my research on the Brazilian state, I did have some new information, data, and initial conclusions that I could share with these MST activists. My presentation was not simply "parroting" (Gillan & Pickerill, 2012, p. 138) activists, but rather, critically engaging with the reasons why the movement was able to transform public schools in some locations and not others. I shared information on the different strategies that I saw MST activists employing across the country, and how state officials were reacting to these educational initiatives. My primary goal was to illustrate that the state is not a coherent entity throughout the country, but rather, public officials (even from the same political parties) have different relationships to and perspectives about the movement. The opportunities and the constraints in each location are radically different, depending on the political regime and the nature of state-society relations. Thus, I argued, MST activists have a lot of agency in transforming the public school system, even in some unexpected and seemingly difficult contexts.

Before each of my presentations I gave the MST activists a handout with the following set of questions to answer: What parts of the presentation resonated with the experiences in your state? What aspects of the data presented do you disagree with, or believe are incorrect, or irrelevant to your own reality? Can you describe your own experiences and interactions with municipal, state, and federal officials, in relationship to the attempt to implement

the pedagogy of the MST in schools, formal university courses, or other educational programs? These surveys, and the questions that MST activists posed after each of my presentations, helped solidify many aspects of my arguments. However, these reflections also put some of my conclusions into question. After each presentation I carefully recorded the activists' critiques and comments. I have incorporated these reflections throughout my writing process. In this sense, not a single one of the arguments I make in my dissertation is entirely my own; they were all developed in conversation with movement activists.

The Tensions of Being an Activist in Academia

Thus far this article has reflected on the ethics of social movement scholarship, a topic that many other scholars have analyzed. However, missing from much of this literature is a critical question: how can we stay true to the "activist" part of the activist-scholar identity? The most important lesson I have learned in this regard is to be humble, and to always remember that scholarship is not the same as activism. I remember learning this lesson my second semester of graduate school, when I was writing a paper about Antonio Gramsci and his theories of hegemony and revolutionary strategy. I was excited about what I was learning, and I sent a few paragraphs from a paper that I was writing to my father without telling him I had written the paper. He is a union organizer and I thought he would also be excited that I was studying issues of revolutionary strategy, the state, and civil society. In

response, my father wrote back a one-line email: “I can’t believe you have to read this crap.”

I think it is necessary for us to remember that no matter how political, radical, or movement-relevant our publications, this does not replace the “action” part of the action-theory praxis. We only have to go as far back as Freire to remember that, “when a word is deprived of its dimension of action, reflection automatically suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into verbalism, into an alienated and alienating ‘blah’, ‘blah’, ‘blah’” (Freire, 2002, pp. 87–88). In other words, activist-scholars have to be activists, as well as scholars. This is difficult because, while academia seems to accept our research on political movements “over there,” involvement in local struggles that are occurring “here” (especially involving the university itself) is not considered professional behavior. Lewis’s (2012) assertion that “an activist research methodology requires the realization that the structures of the academy must also be sites of struggle of resistance” (p. 230) is easier said than done. This is particularly true for emerging scholars whose careers are most at stake by taking on an activist-scholar identity (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012). Here is an extended quote from Frances Fox Piven on this topic:

> Scholarship of itself, even critical scholarship, even reform-oriented scholarship, is not a problem in an academic career, at least not any longer. The tension between scholarship and activism is likely to arise not when we reflect in scholarly terms about social and political problems, but when we commit ourselves to the more troubling sorts of demands that advance

> the interests and ideas of groups that are at the margins of public life, the people who are voiceless, degraded and exploited. And the tension is particularly acute when we commit ourselves to the often disorderly movements that try to advance the political causes of these groups, when we join our critiques of the institutional arrangements that the movements are trying to change to commitment to the movement itself. (Piven, 2010, p. 808)

As Piven states, the tensions in being an activist-scholar do not arise when we engage in a critical analysis of current social problems, but rather, when we participate in disruptive social struggles. This is not meant to discount scholarly contributions; rather, it is simply acknowledging the professional risks of participating in other forms of activism beyond scholarship.

I have been involved in several different political struggles in the San Francisco Bay Area as a graduate student at UC Berkeley. These struggles have included organizing a state-wide attempt to prevent tuition increases in the University of California between 2009 and 2010, which resulted in the largest campus protests in decades; being a steward for our graduate student union and fighting for salary increases, better benefits, and the general protection of graduate student instructors; and, participating in local struggles for food justice, including an occupation of an urban farm owned by the University of California in the city of Albany in 2012. As a graduate student, I have received a lot of pushback and critiques about these political activities. As a future professor, I am sure that the

tensions in being both an activist and an academic will become even more acute. However, it is *acknowledging* these contradictions and constantly being self-reflective about where we are we are dedicating our time and energy, which will help us be activist-scholars for our entire careers.

(In) Conclusions

The reflections in this article were inspired by a panel on activism and social movement research, which Professor Nisha Thapliyal and I organized in June of 2013. We took advantage of the location of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) Conference in Buenos Aires, and invited two MST activists—Marli Zimmerman and Elizabete Witcel—to present with us about education and research.

This experience was both rewarding and frustrating. I was frustrated because the arrival of two MST activists into the pinnacle of academia—an academic conference—was a non-event. Accompanying Elizabete and Marli for the week, my perception was that they were mostly ignored, or at best, politely complimented without any real intellectual engagement. I began to realize that a professor who writes about social movements simply holds more power, influence, and consequently receives more attention than the activists that she or he studies. I was also forced to come to come to terms with Elizabete and Marli's perception of the academy: "Rebecca, this is your world, but it is not ours," they told me on the third day after sitting though a few particularly dry academic presentations. "It is so cold" they said, referring to

the opening ceremony where some academics welcomed the crowd of scholars, but there was no cultural performance or activity that made everyone feel included.

Nonetheless, at our presentation entitled "Social Mobilizations for Education in Brazil, India, and the USA: A Dialogue Between Activists and Academics," we had a reasonable group of twenty people attend. Throwing away academic norms, we put everyone in a circle and began our presentation with a typical MST *mística*, or cultural performance. To an attentive room, Marli and Elizabete described their struggle to access primary education, and their transformation into educators once they joined the movement. The reaction from the audience was extremely positive, reminding me of the many scholars in the academy who are dedicated to research on and with social movements.

Thus, despite the frustrations I felt in Buenos Aires, I left the conference with a renewed dedication to being part of an academic community that values this work: the attendees of our panel, my politically-engaged colleagues at UC Berkeley, a countless number of students I have had the privilege of teaching, and other scholars and students I have not yet met. It was through academia that I was able to live with and learn from the MST for over seventeen months, and see first-hand the movement's innovative educational initiatives and how MST activists are redefining public schooling in Brazil. It was also through academia that I was able to re-connect with Marli and Elizabete in Buenos Aires, and share another week of our lives together. Most recently, in February of 2014, it was due to my flexible schedule as a graduate student that I was

able to lead a delegation of U.S.-based political activists to the MST's Sixth National Congress in Brasília. Maintaining relationships with international activists is difficult, but it is "central to every stage of the activist research" (Choudry, 2013, p. 143). Academia offers a professional space where scholars—if dedicated to not simply being "parachute researches" (Dawson & Sinwell, 2012, p. 181)—are able to preserve and deepen these relationships.

In summary, there are several important lessons that I learned about collaborative research while working with the MST. First, the questions we ask should be framed to move beyond causal arguments about movement success and failure, and instead, allow for a more critical reflection on the nuances and ambiguities of political struggle. Second, the research process should also break down the false dichotomy between researcher/subject and scholar/activist, to ensure both real collaborative knowledge production and international political solidarity. Collaboration with social movements is not only about research, but also about being engaged in domestic political struggles that build international solidarity. Collaboration should not be an uncritical celebration of the movement; however, critique has to be framed in a way that is constructive and can help the movement move forward. Collaboration must also involve using our position as academics to research not only the social movements, but also the powerful actors that influence the trajectories of these movements. It is also important to acknowledge the ways in which our gender, class, nationality, and racialized experiences affect our ability to be part of

in this type of research. Lastly, dialogue and feedback must be a component of any collaborative research program, and consequently, this means that our research findings are always being co-produced with our research "subjects".

I realize that being an activist-scholar will never stop being a contradiction. However, I do think that social movement researchers dedicated to critical engagement, collaboration, and sharing can help to build a more robust understanding of activism and political struggle. My personal contribution has been trying to understand the complicated and multifaceted nature of the "state," and the ways in which grassroots groups engage with state institutions as terrains of contestation. I hope this research can be meaningful for activists in Brazil, the United States, and other global contexts. I also know that regardless of my research contributions, this does not, cannot, and will not replace my commitment to political struggles domestically. Being part of struggles to transform the unequal power structures *in* the United States is one of the most important and pressing form of international collaboration/ solidarity we can have with movements in the global south. Being part of these local struggles has been a critical part of my own happiness and well being as a graduate student. In that light, I end with this quote from Frances Fox Piven:

> Finally, scholar activists should stop regarding themselves as martyrs. We are activists because of the joy political work gives us, because even when we fail, working to make our society kinder, fairer, more just, gives a satisfaction like

no other, because the comrades we find in the effort are friends like no other, and also because our activist efforts illuminate our social and political world in ways that scholarship alone never can (Piven, 2010, p. 810).

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